

Lecture 2: Chicano Literature

Objectives

- Understand Mexican American Literature in its historical context
- Explore its literature
- Debunk stereotypes

Introduction

The American continent, the last region of the world to be discovered by Europeans, was settled mainly by Spanish-, Portuguese-, and English-speaking peoples. After its discovery, the New World became the promised land.

The Spaniards who conquered the New World were looking for more than gold; they were also in search of the promised land. From Tenochtitlan, the old Aztec capital, they set out to look for their utopia. Some headed south to the land of El Dorado; some went to Florida to seek the Fountain of Youth; and some pressed on to Aztlan (later to be called Texas), or Arizona, or New Mexico, or California. In Aztlan, this promised land, Chicanos would one day create their own literature, slightly different from that of central Mexico and quite different from that of the Anglo-Americans living on the periphery of their territory.

In 1836, part of that territory, Texas, became independent and later, in 1845, received its statehood. In 1848, with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after the Mexican War, Mexico ceded the rest of the territory north of the Rio Grande to the United States. Some of the Spanish-speaking inhabitants decided to go south to Mexico, but most refused to move and automatically became American citizens. According to the treaty, however, they were to be allowed to keep their language, culture, and traditions. Thus, a new minority was created. Their number constantly increased as immigrants arrived from Mexico, attracted to Aztlan by the affluent economy of the United States.

The dream, however, was not to become a reality for most of the new immigrants or for the native settlers of the Southwest, for they soon discovered that the dominant English-speaking majority considered them outsiders and that America was not willing to share the good life with them. Caught between two cultures, ignorant of the ways of the law, and at a disadvantage because of language difficulties, they were soon relegated to the status of second-class citizens. In 1940 they were still the “forgotten people,” and as recently as 1969, the “invisible minority. If they are forgotten or invisible, it is not because of their number but because members of the dominant culture chose to ignore them. Chicanos, in fact, constitute the second largest minority group in the country.

It is often implied that Chicanos are passive, unwilling to fight for a better place in the social scale of American life. The history of the Chicanos, however, shows that they have not been a passive, resigned people expecting all salvation to come from without. As early as the 1800s they protested their treatment, and uprisings were recorded in the popular literature of the period. They also organized citizens' associations for mutual aid and protection and to secure civil rights due them under the law. Over the years, these organizations have become numerous and influential, reaching into all areas that affect the lives of Chicanos. But it was not until the 1960s that the Chicano movement was born and began to spread rapidly throughout the nation. The cultural aspect of the movement has been outstanding, resulting in a wealth of literature, much of which is bilingual (written in a mixture of Spanish and English), and the establishment of theater groups, news-papers, and literary reviews. It is a literature that aspires to give expression to the Chicanos' view of the society in which they live, and it describes how interrelations with the majority group affect Chicanos' attitudes toward themselves and toward life in general.

1.The Roots of Chicano Literature

a. Pre-Chicano Literature (to 1848)

The cultural forces that eventually gave rise to Chicano literature date from the late sixteenth century when the Spanish conquistadores moved northward from the Mexican interior and began the colonization of what is now the southwestern United States. These forces were, in the early colonial period at least, predominantly Spanish. Although the native Mexicans had developed sophisticated cultures, including impressive traditions of folklore and literature, the Spaniards quickly imposed their own culture throughout this vast territory, particularly the institutions of language and religion. It should be pointed out that the Conquest occurred during Spain's greatest literary age, the era Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Gongora. Spanish drama flourished especially during this period, stimulated by the custom of the *teatro corrales*, according to which dramatic groups would set up a small stage, and perform. Another point bears mention is that many of the Spanish officers were intelligent, educated, and cultured men, anxious to leave the imprint of their country's highest traditions in the New World. As for the foot soldiers commoners, they too influenced the course of Spanish-American culture. Steeped in folklore, they deposited their legends, tales, and songs along the paths of conquest.

It was thus in keeping with the spirit of the times that in 1598, Juan Onate and a contingent of over five hundred colonists entered New Mexico and promptly established a tradition of folk drama there. In celebration of Onate's feat, Captain Marcos Farfan

composed a play which described the Spaniards' *entrada* into New Mexico and their reception by gracious Indians anxious to hear the word of God.

Folk drama flourished in New Mexico-and to a lesser extent throughout the Spanish-speaking Southwest-until the late nineteenth century. The plays were composed anonymously, for the most part, and preserved primarily in oral tradition. Most of the plays were autos (religious pieces), often composed by priests and used by them for instructional purposes among the Indians. Some works popular in the Southwest were imported from Spain, but these frequently underwent changes to conform to an American environment. One early drama from New Mexico, for example, featured the abduction of the Christ Child by Comanches. Other plays, like that of Farfan, were strictly southwestern creations. But the largest number of plays presented in the Spanish Southwest originated in the Mexican heartland and diffused northward.

Travel narratives, such as those of Cabeza de Vaca and Castafieda, appeared in the early colonial period. In 1610, Gaspar Perez de Villagra, a classical scholar from Salamanca and a companion of Onate, published his History of New Mexico in thirty-four Virgilian cantos. During the next century, Francisco Palou, a Franciscan priest, composed his four-volume Historical Memoirs of New California. Other residents of the Southwest wrote a good deal, of diaries, descriptive narratives, and light verse.

Other types of literary folklore prospered in the region. Legends, treating a variety of subjects such as witchcraft, miracles, and lost treasure, are of special significance. One of the oldest and most popular legends in the Spanish Southwest is that of *la llorona* (The Weeping Woman). A true synthesis of Spanish and Indian traditions, *la llorona* has become an important cultural symbol and the prototype of numerous female figures in Mexican and Chicano fiction.

The custom of folksong also contributed significantly to the establishment of a literary tradition among the southwestern Mexicans. Here again, the types of folksong that took root in the region-the *romance*, *copla*, and *decima*, for example-were originally Spanish forms modified by Indian and mestizo influences. This process took place with extraordinary speed: only thirty years after the Conquest, Mexican Indians were composing romance-like ballads of their own.

The traditional forms of Spanish balladry thrived in Greater Mexico until they were superseded in mid-nineteenth century by a Mexican type, the *corrido*. The name derives from the verb *correr*-to run-and the corrido does just that; it is a fast-paced narrative ballad, usually with a theme of struggle, adventure, or catastrophe. Nowhere did the corrido flourish more than in the lower borderlands of Texas. The animosity between Anglos and Mexicans, which coalesced in the Texas Revolution of 1836 and persisted well into the present century, created the perfect conditions for the emergence of a corrido tradition. Most of these ballads were composed anonymously in rural areas

and made their way to city printing shops on both sides of the border. A few apparently first appeared as broadsides and were then transformed through oral transmission.

b.

The great divide in Chicano history is the year 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended twenty-one months of warfare between Mexico and the United States. According to the treaty, Mexico ceded half its national territory to the United States: the present states of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and half of Colorado. The Mexican residents of these areas had the choice of migrating southward across the new boundary or accepting American citizenship. Only two thousand people left their homes, while some eighty thousand remained, thus becoming, in the most literal sense of the term, Mexican-Americans. Although a distinctive Mexican-American literary sensibility was not to emerge for several generations, the signing of Guadalupe Hidalgo, more than any other event, required that the southwestern Mexicans begin to rethink their relationships to the old country and to the United States.

Given the histories of Anglo- and Mexican-Americans, no one could have expected affairs between the two peoples to be harmonious. The bitterness that characterized the relationship from its inception had its origins in the English-Spanish hostilities of the sixteenth century. The Anglos believed that Mexicans were lazy, priest-ridden, treacherous, and cruel, while Mexicans regarded Anglos as arrogant, ruthless, and avaricious. To arouse their suspicions further, southwestern Mexicans had watched the unfolding of an American scheme of penetration and appropriation in their territory since 1807, the year of the Zebulon Pike expedition. As the number of Americans in the country increased dramatically, particularly after the opening of the Texas settlements and the Santa Fe Trail in 1821, Mexican concern turned to alarm. The inevitable conflicts between the two groups soon became a major theme in the Mexican literature of the Southwest.

Nowhere was the enmity between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans more intense than in the border regions of south Texas. Guadalupe Hidalgo had guaranteed Mexican-Americans full rights as citizens but, in fact, they were frequently stripped of their property and subjected to severe discrimination. The Mexican-Americans expressed their resentment of this treatment in the large number of *corridos* that sprang from the region. The ballad makers found one of their earliest heroes in Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, a member of an old Rio Grande family who endeared himself to the border Mexicans in 1859 when he shot the Anglo marshall of Brownsville. This incident stirred in Cortina memories of other Anglo outrages, and he consequently launched a campaign of reprisal. Cortina thus became an instant hero. *Corridos* about him were apparently composed promptly after his Brownsville skirmish, and others appeared as he continued his war against the gringos. Here are verses from two separate ballads:

Ese general Cortinas
 es libre y muy soberano,
 han subido sus honores
 porque salvo a un mexicano.
 Los americanos hacian huelga,
 borracheras en las cantinas,
 de gusto que habi'a muerto
 ese general Cortinas.

The famed general Cortinas
 is quite sovereign and free,
 The honor due him is greater,
 for he saved a Mexican life.
 The Americans made merry.
 They got drunk in the saloons,
 Out of joy over the death
 of the famed General Cortinas

Just as the seventeenth-century narratives of Indian captivity may be said to constitute the earliest examples of Anglo-American writing, so the *corridos* of border conflict may be said to compose an incipient form of Chicano literature. The forms and the language of the ballads are conventionally Mexican, but the themes, the intensity of sentiments and the level of cultural awareness associated with these themes represent a departure from Mexican models. For instance, a striking feature of the folklore from central Mexico in the generation after Guadalupe Hidalgo is the relatively little attention given to the Anglo-American, the Mexicans presumably being preoccupied with such matters as the rebuilding of a defeated nation, the social upheavals associated with the *Reforma*, and the French occupation.

Bad feelings in the south Texas borderlands reached their peak after the turn of the century, and the *corridos* document these animosities fully. The best known ballad of the period is "Gregorio Cortez" which is still heard in Chicano communities throughout the United States. *Corridos* are frequently reliable sources of history, but the Cortez ballads are more valuable for what they tell us about the psychology of border Mexicans. They express not only an intense resentment of Anglos but also denounce Anglo views of Mexican character. In Anglo-Texan mythology, the Mexican is a poor marksman (a knife, preferably in the back, being his weapon of preference), and is stupid and cowardly. The Texas-Mexicans knew these attitudes well and were deeply stung by them.

The Gregorio Cortez of the ballads is certainly a more interesting character than the historical figure, representing an attempt Mexican-Americans to reclaim the most admired qualities of *vaquero*: culture-horsemanship, marksmanship, courage, and endurance-which Anglo-Americans had appropriated.

Despite the cultural drift that Mexican-Americans in Texas were experiencing around the turn of the century, they still considered themselves "Mexicans" and were likewise designated by Anglos. Mexicans born on the southern bank could move to the other side and experience little change. But all

the while, as we can see in the *corridos* after 1900, the pressures of Anglo-American culture were intensifying:

Naci en la frontera
de aca de este
de aca de este lado
puro mexicano,
por mas que la gente
me juzque texano
yo les aseguro
que soy mexicano
de aca de este lado.

I was born on the border
here on this side,
though here on this side
I'm a pure Mexican,
even though people
may think I'm Texan
I now assure you
that I'm all Mexican
from here on this side

Throughout this period, Mexican-Americans were changing more than they admitted; they clung to their culture in the face of forces that were inevitably altering it.

Many of these alterations were perceptible by the 1920s. Certainly, the Spanish of the Mexican-Americans had been modified-some said infested-by *pochismos* (Americanisms). Even worse, some Mexican- Americans preferred English altogether.

Me case con una pochi	I married a <i>pochi</i>
Para aprender ingles	so that I could learn English
y a los tres dias de casado	And after three days of marriage
Yo ya le decia yes	I was already telling her "yes"

The *corrido* declined in Greater Mexico after 1930, the victim of commercialism and over-exposure. While corridos and other types of ballads are composed and played today, they generally lack the epic appeal of earlier versions. Still, corridos, even more than other genres of folklore, played a critical role in the establishment of a Chicano literary tradition in a period when conventional literary works were relatively scarce. The most effective depiction of the *corrido* as a force in Chicano literary culture appears in a play by Luis Valdez entitled, appropriately enough, *El corrido*. The work deals with the experiences of a Mexican *campesino* who comes to the United States as a migrant worker. He leads a hardscrabble existence, encountering prejudice, the frustration of failed expectations, and the alienation of his Americanized children. One of the fine moments in the play occurs in the back of a truck as it carries migrant workers out to the fields early one cold morning. A young man is casually strumming a guitar when an older fellow slides next to him and asks for a *corrido*. The youngster, somewhat embarrassed, explains he is not sure he knows any. "You're a Chicano, aren't you?" Retorts the old man.

Although the southwestern territories were never as culturally isolated-either before or after the coming of the Anglo-as scholars have generally claimed, opportunities for formal education were scarce until well into the twentieth century. Before 1848, schooling, except in its most rudimentary form, was limited primarily to the privileged classes. After the region was absorbed by the United States, education for Mexican-Americans did not greatly improve for reasons of discrimination and differences over curricula and control of schools. But for those Mexican-Americans who had the tool of literacy, writing was a highly popular activity. Mexican-Americans kept diaries, journals, and "books of personal verses" to which several members of family might contribute. For those writers interested in a larger audience there were Spanish-language newspapers throughout the Southwest that published creative works; in New Mexico alone, the period 1880-1900 saw the establishment of sixty-one such newspaper.

As a group, the Mexican-American writers of New Mexico sought some sort of cultural compromise for their people. They encouraged the retention of Hispanic traditions and the Spanish language, but they also supported statehood,

New Mexican participation in American wars, and the acquisition of English for practical purposes.⁴⁹ In effect, these writers advocated the creation of a culture that was neither Hispanic-Mexican nor Anglo-American. but a synthesis of the Later Chicano writers would also advocate movement towards this goal.

But such a cultural synthesis was not easily attainable, as Mariano Vallejo, a California writer, made clear. A member of one of the most prominent families in the region, Vallejo had early supported statehood for California, maintaining that Mexico had neglected its northernmost territory and that the United States was the "happiest and most free nation in the world." His feelings began to change, however, after he was swindled by *yanquis* in various business deals. When historian H. H. Bancroft encouraged Vallejo to write a history of California, he plunged in- to the project, anxious to tell the Mexican side. He submitted his manuscript in five volumes to Bancroft in 1875.

"What a difference" wrote Vallejo in 1877, "between the present time and those that preceded the usurpation by the Americans. If the Californians could all gather together to breathe a lament, it would reach Heaven as a moving sigh which would cause fear and consternation to the Universe. What misery!" And so went the theme of Vallejo's massive history. The Anglos, propelled by their greed, swarmed in- to California, trampling everything in their paths. Vallejo wrote of Anglo "malefactors" to whom human life had no value. Ultimately, he regarded the Americanization of California as the despoilment of the "true Eden".

Vallejo's history was an intensely personal work, written to show that the Californians "were not indigents or a band of beasts" as they were so frequently depicted by Anglo-Americans. But he held little hope that the Mexican culture of California could withstand the collision with that of the United States. Instead, he foresaw a day when his people might "disappear, ignored of the whole world. Vallejo was not exactly writing for the whole world, but he did want to bring the "true history" of California to Anglo readers. In this endeavor he was exceptional, for in the nineteenth century, Mexican- American authors generally wrote for their own people. It was only after the first decade of the twentieth century that a few Mexican- Americans begin to publish stories and poetry in large circulation American magazines. This difference in audience dramatically affected the character of the literature itself.